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Employers Provide Language Aid

Hot New Gadget Helps Teach Employees English Using Recording and Playback

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José Huerta, a 29-year-old Mexican immigrant, believes the difference between flipping burgers at a restaurant and one day being able to run that restaurant comes down to his ability to speak better English.

After five years at a Jack in the Box Inc. store in Arlington, Texas, he is tackling the language. He's using "Sed de Saber" (Thirst for Knowledge), an interactive gadget that has suddenly become a hot learning tool in service industries like fast food and hotels. The device teaches English to Spanish speakers via a record-and-playback program, and Mr. Huerta is using it in his spare time at home, courtesy of his employer.

"When I talk to customers, they understand me better," says Mr. Huerta, who is now training to be an assistant manager.

In service industries, which have a large Hispanic labor force, helping staff members learn English is a bottom-line issue. It can improve customer service, open up opportunities for promotions and curtail staff turnover, which, in the restaurant business, for example, is more than 100%.

More than half of Jack in the Box's 33,000 U.S. employees are Hispanic, and many aren't proficient in English. Nearly one-third of the 90,000 employees at Brinker International Inc., which owns Chili's, Maggiano's Little Italy and Romano's Macaroni Grill, among other eateries, are Latino, many of them newcomers to the U.S.

For immigrants, who often juggle more than one job and lack transportation, attending night classes regularly can be difficult. Studying English as a Second Language, or ESL, online is rarely an option because most workers don't have a computer at home. Brinker International tried giving employees flash cards with key phrases, but to no

avail.

In 2003, entrepreneur Bill Groux came up with the idea of developing a self-paced, interactive English course for Spanish speakers. His inspiration: observing his young daughter, Elizabeth, play with her LeapPad, an interactive, portable reading toy. So he contacted the toy's maker, Leapfrog Enterprises Inc. of Emeryville, Calif.

Mr. Groux's Retention Education LLC, Newport Beach, Calif., and Leapfrog developed Sed de Saber in two years and launched it with support from Coca-Cola Co. and the Multicultural Food Service and Hospitality Alliance. The Atlanta beverage company contributed by introducing the product to its food-service customers rather than making a direct investment.

The kit includes six books, six cartridges and a LeapPad that takes Spanish speakers to a functional level of English conversation and comprehension in about four months. It teaches vocabulary relevant to work and phrases that are useful in everyday life.

Early this year, a test of Sed de Saber drew "overwhelmingly positive" reaction from Jack in the Box managers and employees, says Mark Blankenship, vice president of human resources at the San Diego-based chain. Now, 6,400 devices are deployed at 2,000 Jack in the Box outlets across the country. "We have employees lining up for this," says Mr. Blankenship.

Thus far, Dallas-based Brinker International has distributed 800 devices. "Workers have returned them to us with tears in their eyes," says José R. Gomez, a senior vice president. He adds that several kitchen staffers who completed the program will undergo management training.

Since January, Retention Education has sold 17,000 units to fast-food companies including Wendy's International Inc., hotel chains like Hilton Hotels Corp., and Rite Aid Corp. Each Sed de Saber kit costs \$275, including a

microphone and headset. "If you reduce turnover by one employee per restaurant, the program completely pays for itself," Mr. Blankenship says.

In response to customer demand, Retention Education is now in the early stages of developing a program that teaches Spanish to English-speaking managers. "Employers want to bridge the communication gap that much faster," says Mr. Groux, who hopes to introduce the product, modeled on Sed de Saber, in mid-2006.

Meanwhile, Sed de Saber is being passed around households. Mr. Huerta reports that his younger brother, who works as a busboy at an Olive Garden restaurant, has been borrowing his kit. "He works with a lot of Americans and wants to communicate with them," says Mr. Huerta. As for himself, he is about to complete the last of the six books. "I hope they make a more advanced version," he says.

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